Eliten und Zivile Gesellschaft: Legitimitätskonflikte in Ostmitteleuropa

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Perhaps no event since the Second World War has had such an impact on our collective geo-political paradigm than the collapse of the Eastern Bloc between 1989 and 1991. Certainly, widespread hopes for a lasting peace and a new golden age following the end of the Cold War have since been dashed. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the wave of ‘velvet revolutions’ that culminated in what the Germans refer to as ‘*die Wende*’ (Changeover, Turning Point, Transition) changed the focus of geo-political activity and loosened up encrusted political structures that seemed, to those of us who grew up in the pre-*Wende* era, to be set in concrete. Moreover, this transition point appeared, at least initially, to herald the beginning of the end of the Age of Mutually Assured Destruction.

And yet, conversations with students, colleagues and researchers working at every level indicate a startling lack of detailed knowledge about what preceded these momentous events. This is particularly true in Anglophone circles in which 1989 is often discussed as a peculiar, completely unexpected – if very welcome – natural caesura in the affairs of man, or, in the words of Francis Fukuyama ‘the end of history’.⁽¹⁾ The situation is only marginally better in those countries directly concerned. There, the relevant narratives tend to be channelled along nationalistic lines and issues of complicity and guilt can often tip the scales in favour of letting sleeping dogs lie rather than fully illuminating past events. In addition, the structure of academia, as it currently stands, often means that research projects come to a halt at state or cultural frontiers (or at the artificial frontiers ring-fencing discrete academic disciplines). The frequent result of this approach is that political and social developments, whose roots and ultimate triggers are to be found elsewhere, appear inexplicable within these narrow contexts and therefore seem to call for fantastical explanations along ‘Sonderweg’ lines.⁽²⁾ I hope this situation is about to change and I strongly suspect that this book will be the catalyst needed to bring about a revolution in our understanding of the relevant history.

In this marvellously detailed tome Helmut Fehr illuminates the revolutionary upheavals in Eastern Europe that culminated in the transition from the planned economies and restrictive governance that characterised Stalin’s legacy, to more inclusive, market-driven forms of social organisation between 1989 and 1991. Focusing on key events in 1968, 1980, and 1989, he focuses his study on Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Drawing upon a broad spectrum of empirical evidence, including

interviews, contemporary documentation, and print media, Fehr seeks to gain a deeper understanding of processes of democratisation and the formation of power elites within these states. Moreover, the primary focus of the book is on the transition of power between the erstwhile Communist/Socialist elites and the newly emergent elites and counter-elites with whom they clashed periodically during the post-Stalinist era.

The overriding narrative, therefore, is one of a series of crises of legitimation each of which resulted in a certain amount of social change and opened up new possibilities for democratisation. Usefully, this core narrative, which covers the period 1968 to 1989, is contextualised and embedded within a longer-term narrative that considers some of the post-1989 developments within the region up to 2013. During this period the object of study transitioned from the three states referred to above to Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia (which went their separate ways as of 1 January 1993), and the Federal Republic of Germany (which incorporated the GDR on 3 October 1990). One of the most striking features of this broad-ranging narrative is the way in which it subsumes the apparent caesura of 1989 and reveals its true nature, namely as just one, albeit important, stage in a long-term process of socio-political transition. There was nothing sudden about it. Far from being 'the end of history', Fehr shows that the *Wende* was just another chapter in European affairs, and one that was, if not entirely predictable, certainly understandable within the wider post-war context.

Throughout the study, Fehr adopts a comparative approach, although the key events around which the narrative is structured had very different impacts in each of the states in question as a result of which comparisons with the other states are, in some cases, not particularly illuminating. As the name suggests, the Prague Spring (1968) had a greater impact in Czechoslovakia than elsewhere in the Eastern Bloc. The advent of Solidarno?? in 1980 was a uniquely Polish affair, for which, as the study makes clear, the social and cultural climate was completely lacking in the GDR and Czechoslovakia. And, whereas 1989 saw the final collapse of the entire Eastern Bloc, the transition was most dramatically visible in the GDR. On the other hand, one of the things that the comparative approach is designed to reveal is precisely this kind of differential impact. Of course, each of these events sent ripples throughout the region and none of them left the neighbouring states completely unaffected. Each represented, to differing degrees, a crisis of legitimacy and challenged the entire command and control system that characterised the region until the dissolution of the USSR on December 26, 1991. Nevertheless, the fact that each event is primarily associated with, or is best understood in relation to, a specific state and not the other two, means that the comparison is spread across the book as a whole rather than on a per chapter basis. Thus, chapter four, 'Solidarno?? 1980 – Populismus und Selbstorganisation der Gesellschaft' (3) is almost entirely devoted to developments in Poland. Similarly, chapter eight 'Krisen des Übergangs: Elitenwechsel in der DDR und Ostdeutschland' (4) is concerned only with the GDR (also known, in its post-Reunification context, as the 'east of Germany'). The degree of direct comparison in these chapters is minimal. Yet these narrowly focused chapters are balanced by others that do work at a truly comparative level, such as chapter twelve, 'Zwischen Vermachtung und Boulevardisierung. Demokratie und Massenmedien in Ostmitteleuropa' (5), which even extends the context to include Hungary. On the whole then the author's chosen methodology – an empirically informed comparative analysis – is entirely appropriate to the subject and is highly productive in terms of the analytic insights it enables.

In addition to contextualising the most important transitional points and paradigm shifts in Eastern Central Europe that paved the way to the breakup of the Eastern Bloc in the final decade of the 20th century, Fehr addresses three specific issues. At a fundamental level he considers systemic antagonisms between ideologies and the interests of normal citizens as manifested in tangible differences between social elites and non-elites. He also analyses the role and impact of members of political elites as actors in the public sphere. At a more conceptually difficult level he discusses the transition from what he refers to as 'independent and simulated public spheres'. This concept encompasses structural issues within the East European public sphere, whereby the author analyses such things as dealing with the past, tabloidization in public discourse, and the region's relationship to the broader European project.

Given its broad coverage, the publishers' (or the author's) concept of the target readership – students of

sociology, political science and contemporary history as well as ‘Europe sociologists’ – seems unduly narrow. There is no reason why Germanists, Slavic specialists and those working in media studies, cultural studies and discourse analysis should not benefit enormously from such a well-researched and carefully argued book. Particularly for those working in the more tightly defined disciplinary siloes, like German studies, such a comparative contextualisation of events with which they may already be – perhaps too – familiar will open up new perspectives and question established narratives.

This volume is structured around five main sections. Part one sets out and contextualises the main events at each of the key junctures: 1968, 1980, and 1989. Part two analyses antagonisms and transitions between competing political elites before and after 1989. Part three analyses a mixed bag of themes from historical framing and contextualisation during the transitional period, through lustration processes and the removal of vestiges of the ‘Communist’ regime throughout the region, to the role of the mass media, national self-stereotyping, and issues of national sovereignty versus Europeanization and economic integration. Part four is concerned with the day-to-day workings of democracy in that it analyses problems arising from the inherent antagonism between civil liberties, self-expression, nationalism, and political and economic control in a nominally democratic context. Part five rounds off the study with some concluding thoughts and the author’s considered view of the region’s immediate outlook. This is well summed up by the heading of the only chapter in this short section: ‘Gespaltene Eliten in unkonsolidierten Demokratien’ (6) – a descriptor that could be applied to most Western democracies with equal justification.

Each of parts one to four could have been ‘topped and tailed’ and published as monographs in their own right, which brings me to my only serious criticism of the book. It covers so much ground that it would require much better navigational aids than it currently possesses in order to be useful to the maximum number of researchers. For, whilst the source references, footnotes and bibliography are good, there is no index. By itself, the list of contents, which includes headings for each of the five parts, the chapters, and the sections within the chapters, is not adequate as a navigational tool. It is not obvious, for example, that section 5.3 ‘Politische Initiativen und Klubs’ (7) is primarily about Poland whereas Section 5.4 ‘Zivilgesellschaft und “unpolitische Politik”’ (8) is mainly concerned with events in Czechoslovakia prior to 1989. The omission of a comprehensive index is actually very common in German books and is certainly something that ought to be addressed as a matter of urgency. (9) In effect, the lack of an index means that the book has to be read from cover to cover by every reader. Researchers interested in Poland, or the Solidarno?? movement or Lech Wa??sa or events at the Danzig shipyards will find a wealth of information *between the covers* of this book – but there is no way to be any more accurate than that about where they will find it. However, this is a cultural issue and should not be taken as a condemnation of this specific volume. Perhaps the publisher could give the matter some consideration for the next edition. On a similar note, the bibliography, whilst very comprehensive, would benefit from some level of granularity. For example, arranging the quoted sources under category headings like ‘Polish sources’, ‘recorded interviews’, ‘newspaper reports’, and so on would increase its utility value.

Overall, Fehr has produced an impressive volume of detailed empirical research and careful analysis. But for the navigational issues mentioned above, it is difficult to imagine how one could improve upon or, indeed, equal the scholarship that this book represents. However, given the relative lack of interest in German as a medium of scholarship today, there is a risk that it may fail to achieve the recognition and impact it deserves unless steps are taken in the near future to produce an English translation. Failing to do so would be a regrettable development as this monograph has the potential, and really ought, to become a seminal source on the social and political developments that preceded and followed the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in 1989–90.

Notes

1. F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, (New York, NY, 1992). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Sonderweg (German) = separate, special or unique course of development. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Solidarno?? 1980 – populism and self-organisation of society. [Back to \(3\)](#)

4. Transition crises: the changeover of elites in the GDR and eastern Germany.[Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. Between the concentration of power and tabloidization. Democracy and the mass media in Eastern Central Europe.[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. Divided elites in unconsolidated democracies.[Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. Political initiatives and clubs.[Back to \(7\)](#)
 8. Civil society and un-political politics.[Back to \(8\)](#)
 9. German books often include an 'Orts- und Personenregister' (Index of Places and People), which is better than nothing, but still means that one cannot easily locate specific topics covered within the book which happen to be denoted by a noun or phrase rather than a toponym or proper noun.[Back to \(9\)](#)
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